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The Influence of Merleau-Ponty

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INTRODUCTION

> We never cease living in a world of perception, but we bypass it in critical thought--almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth. For critical thought encounters only bare propositions which it discusses, accepts, or rejects. Critical thought has broken with the naive evidence of things, and when it affirms, it is because it no longer finds any means of denial. However necessary this activity of verification may be, specifying criteria and demanding from our experience its credentials of validity, it is not aware of our contact with the perceived world which is simply there before us, beneath the level of the verified true and false.[1]

Anyone who reads the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty attentively will note the groping character of his thought. Ideas which in a given passage begin to delineate themselves are assigned further shades of meaning in the next, not simply because Merleau-Ponty wants to acquaint the peruser gradually with a thought that is already fully elaborated in his mind but because he, himself, is still searching and seeking greater clarity. For Merleau-Ponty, the groping is not a question of descending to the level of the reader but delineates a thinker who himself, while writing, is still pursuing the truth. One must therefore abstain from ascribing to Merleau-Ponty definitive and sharply circumscribed concepts.

The artist, as well as the philosopher, does not seek to dwell in a world in which all the boundaries are traced, in which the meaning

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[1] Alden L. Fisher, ed., "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work," in The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 367.

of reality is clearly defined. It is an individual who by means of a certain attitude determines the lines assumed by these realms of making and thinking. He delineates them from the scope of being that precedes them only to find that this scope is a chiaroscuro and has no room for Cartesian clear and distinct ideas which pertain to mathematics and pure logic. In this realm of existence all is interwoven and therefore refers to itself and to everything else, so that lines of demarcation would do violence to this interconnection. While the artist may, indeed must, try to form concepts of this primordial level of existence, he should also keep in mind that on this level the concept will have to be permeated with flexibility, ambiguity, density, and the obscurity that is demanded by this ontology.

CHAPTER I

THE EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

Existentialism is a fundamental position from which to view human experience. It seeks to go beyond or underneath the abstracting mind and all its intellectual edifices, bent on restoring a presumption-less standpoint from which immediate concrete experience can be directly confronted and examined.[1] In searching for a way of delivering the active consciousness from purposeful involvements, it also frees itself to see what is there to be seen, and to see itself at the same time. It is a philosophy that recognizes the world of the individual as a contingent situation and an unfinished task that demands each of us to undertake a rational description of the structures or systems of our individual situation.

To study the individual situation requires the study of essences of which the phenomenological viewpoint becomes a necessity. Phenomenology is therefore the study of essences, and eventually all problems amount to finding definitions of essences. It is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any other point than that of their facticity. Phenomenology is trans-

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[1]Arturo B. Fallico, Art and Existentialism, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 1.

cendental in that it places in obeyance the assertions rising out of the natural attitude in order to understand them, and maintains that the world is always there before reflection begins. It acts as an inalienable presence with all its efforts concentrated upon the reachievement of a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endows that contact with a philosophical status.[2]

Although phenomenology is a matter of description, it is not a method of analysis or explanation. It is a return to things themselves and is from the start a rejection of science. Science has not, and never will have by its very nature, the same significance of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world. Merleau-Ponty writes in The Phenomenology of Perception the following:

> I am, not a living creature nor even a man, nor again even a consciousness endowed with all the characteristics which zoology, social anatomy or inductive psychology recognize in these various products of the natural or historical process. I am the absolute source, my existence does not stem from my antecedents; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself the tradition which I elect to carry on--since that distance is not one of its properties.[3]

Scientific points of view are always naive and at the same time dishonest because they take for granted, without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view; that of the consciousness, which from the outset a world, forms itself around the individual and begins to exist for the individual. To return to things themselves is to return to that

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[2]M. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), p. vii.

[3]Ibid., p. 54.

world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks. It is a relationship in which every scientific order is an abstract and derivative, or consequential, sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learned previously what constitutes a lake, a plateau or a mountain.

Prior to the work of Merleau-Ponty, René Descartes, followed by Immanuel Kant, presented consciousness as the absolute certainty of one's existence for oneself and as the sole condition for that very existence. It was their assumption that any research in consciousness would entail an exploration that dealt with an analytical reflection toward the inner man. This was to be achieved through a series of prior constituting acts. However, for Merleau-Ponty, perception became the basic activity of consciousness making all cousciousness initially perceptual and analyzing it in a primordial way with all other resultant modes of thinking being analyzed deductively. Therefore, consciousness can have no contents and can have no independent existence, no existence apart from the world.[4] It would also follow that there can be no intelligible thesis for idealism (a direct opposition to the works of Descartes and Kant) which relies on the independence of consciousness and the dependence of objects on consciousness.

In La Structure du Comportement, Merleau-Ponty traces the relationships that are obtained between the perceiving organism and its environment, to find that they are not those of an automatic

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[4]Robert C. Solomon, From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth Century Backgrounds, (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1972), p. 261.

machine which needs an outside agent to set off its pre-established mechanisms. It becomes equally clear that one does not account for the facts by superimposing a pure, contemplative consciousness on a thing-like body. Studies in modern psychology and physiology reveal a sort of prospective activity in an organism, as if it entertained certain familiar relations with them, and as if there were an a priori (from cause to effect) of the organism, privileged conducts and laws of internal equilibrium which predispose an organism to certain relations with its environment.[5] The perceiving organism shows that there is a Cartesian mixture of the soul with the body. Existence is seen as an incarnated mind which entertains an ambiguous relation with the body, and, correlatively, with perceived things.

The internal relationship of the perceiving organism, that of the mind and body, becomes the foundation for Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception. Within the work, Merleau-Ponty explores the installation of ourselves in our perceptual behaviors in order to pursue an analysis of the relationship. Studies in psychopathology show that the body is no longer merely an object in the world under the power of a separated spirit. It is instead on the side of the subject; it is our point of view on the world, the place where the spirit takes on a certain physical and descriptive situation. As Descartes stated:

> . . . the soul is not merely in the body like a pilot in his ship; it is wholly intermingled with the body. The body, in turn, is wholly animated and all its functions contribute

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[5]Remy C. Kwant, The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963), pp. 225-226.

to the perception of objects.[6]

Thus perception takes place through the unity of the mind and the body; the body not being an object or sum of objects, but a unified field, as is the world of objects it perceives.

External space is grasped through the bodily situation since the body is not in space like things. It inhabits or haunts space. Merleau-Ponty describes this relationship as follows:

> The body applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it we have direct access to space. The body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions. Even our most secret affective movements, those most deeply tied to the humoral infrastructure, help to share our perception of things.[7]

It is because of this relationship that a delicate ambiguity must exist.

Digging down to the perceived world, it becomes noticeable that the sensory qualities are not opaque, indivisible givens, which are simply exhibited to a remote consciousness. Colors, each surrounded by an affective atmosphere, have been studied by psychologists and are found, in themselves, to be different modalities of our coexistence with the world. Chromatic perception is illustrative of this line of reasoning:

> . . . the chromatic value assigned to an excitation depends on the chromatic structure and also, but not exclusively,

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[6]Alden L. Fisher, ed., "An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of His Work," in The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 369.

[7]M. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), p. 105.

> on local excitations. For example, gray paper on a yellow background appears blue; the background is as important as the local excitation (the gray paper) in the perception of blue. However, we must also consider the assignment of spatial arrangement. When a gray ring is resting on a background which is half green and half red the whole ensemble is perceived, it appears gray; but when a strip of paper or wire is laid across the ring at the point of separation between the red and green, then half the ring appears reddish and half appears greenish. This occurs because in the first part of the experiment the forces of cohesion which held the ring together were strong enough to block out other stimulations, while in the second part of the experiment the ring had become nonhomogenous, and other stimulating forces took command. Changes in chromatic perception, therefore, depend on changes in the arrangement of the whole field and cannot be comprehended at all in terms of a one to one correspondence of afferent and efferent neurons.[8]

In short, all the relations that are encountered directly or subliminally are different ways for stimuli to test, to solicit, and to vary our grasp on the world. One finds that perceived things, unlike simple geometric objects, are not bounded entities whose laws of construction we possess in a sacrosanct manner. They are open, inexhaustible systems that one is never able to explore entirely. "Our world," as Malebranche said, "is an unfinished task."[9] Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which one does not yet know what will be written. It is also like a new language; one does not know what works it will accomplish but only that, once it has appeared, it cannot fail to say little or much, to have a history and a meaning. The very productivity or freedom of human life, far

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[8]Garth Gillan, ed., The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty, (Edwardsville, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 8-9.

[9]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Full Encounter: Existentialism in the Twentieth Century, ed. Garth Gillan (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), p. 582.

from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression.

Therefore, the character of perception appears to be ambiguous. We are in contact with things, but we cannot coincide with, or exhaust, these things. We are rooted in truth, since we are in contact with the real, but error and hallucination are always possible, since the real always seems to escape us to some extent. The universality of truth is not pronounced, but, on the contrary, emerges from the intersection of men's lives and from the appeal of one human life to another. The unity and articulation are both intermingled. We experience and our experience envelopes us rather than being held and circumscribed by our mind.

Even when one considers the field of knowledge, the field in which the mind seeks to possess truth and to define its objects in order to attain a universal wisdom, then one is limited. It must be realized that knowledge is never terminated because there is no end to the attainable due to the fact that knowledge is always permeated with not knowing. Knowledge, as truth, cannot be delineated by firm concepts. The whole process resists being bracketed; rather it stands beyond these divisions as an open unity, wherein each element is autonomous yet condemned to meaning, unique but also contributing to the obscure but discernible systems of equivalences.[10]

It further follows that truth does not inhabit only the inner man, or more accurately, there is no inner man. Man is simply in the

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[10]Richard Gill and Ernest Sherman, ed., The Fabric of Existentialism (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 568.

world and only in the world does he know himself. Merleau-Ponty states the following:

> . . . when I return to myself from an excursion into the realm of dogmatic common sense or of science, I find, not a source of intrinsic truth, but a subject destined to be in the world.[11]

Due to the fact that our existence is interwoven with the world and therefore it is really a dialog with the world--it must be realized that this dialog reaches its most profound point on a primordial level that is conscious of itself. Therefore, all man can do is erect some pointers in his darkness. To reach these levels one must deal with the problematic of reduction. Through the work of Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty realized that the most important lesson that reduction teaches us is in fact the impossibility of a complete reduction.[12] This is based on the fact that we, as individuals, are not absolute mind, for there is simply no thought which embraces all thought, since our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux. This is the same flux that we as individuals are always trying to grasp and permanently transfix.

Because man is a body-subject, truth cannot be absolute; truth cannot be in principle universal; evidence cannot be absolute, Merleau-Ponty approached the reality of man in the generality of a certain idea, only to find that some aspects were very clear while others were unable to be seen. For this reason, there is simply no room for a conscious existence that would be reducible to the body-subject. For

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[11] M. Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), p. xi.

[12] Robert C. Solomon, From Rationalism to Existentialsim: The Existentialists and Their Ninteenth-Century Backgrounds, (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1972), p. 251.

this reason also, Merleau-Ponty endeavored to stress in our conscious existence those aspects which point to its roots in the body-subject.[13]

Every reduction is transcendental and eidetic. The transcendency lies in the realization that the only way to view the reflection towards consciousness is to step back and lessen, so to speak, the amount of intent which attaches one to one's world. That means that we cannot subject our perception of the world to philosophical scrutiny without ceasing to be identified with the act of the placement of the world, which limits us, without drawing back from our commitment. It is thus made to appear as a spectacle without passing from the fact of our existence to its origin.[14] The world is spread out and completely transparent, quickened through and through by a series of apperceptions.

Looking for the world's essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for that essence as a fact for us, before any combination has occurred. Sensationalism reduces the world by noticing that we, as individuals, never experience anything but states of ourselves. Cartesian idealism offers reduction as based on thought or consciousness of the world, minus the relationship of the body. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty sought reduction through the determination to bring the world to light as it is before any falling back on ourselves has occurred and to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of

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[13]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Full Encounter: Existentialism in the Twentieth Century, ed. Garth Gillan (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1970), p. 575.

[14]Ibid.

consciousness. By virtue of this noncognitive life, we are never genuinely detached from things; we are, in a sense, a dynamic project continually immersed in and directed towards them. According to Merleau-Ponty, we are in the realm of truth by the very nature of imposing a reduction. To seek the essence of perception is to simply declare that perception is not presumed true, but defined as access to truth. As Merleau-Ponty stated:

> . . . the world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible. There is the world and the very facticity of the world is what constitutes it itself and what causes the world to be the world; just as the facticity of the cogito is not an imperfection in itself, but rather assures one of one's existence.[15]

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[15] Ibid., pp. 576-577.

CHAPTER II

THE RELATIONSHIP OF PHILOSOPHY TO THE ARTIST

It is the artist who arrests the spectacle within which most of humanity dwells without really seeing: hence, it is his job to make this phenomenon visible to the most sensitive among them. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no art for pleasure's sake alone. One can invent pleasurable objects by linking old ideas in a new way and by presenting forms that have been seen before; such a method of speaking or painting indirectly is generally referred to as culture. However, the artist is not satisfied to be a cultural beast, finding it necessary to assimilate this culture to its very foundations and to endow it with a new structure. Merleau-Ponty remarks, "he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before."[1] Conversely, it must follow that what the artist expresses cannot be the rendition of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been uttered by ourselves or by others.

The painter understands as he paints, not prior to the movement involved in the work itself. Conception does not necessarily precede execution. Nature is not initially bestowed upon the artist

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[1] Alden L. Fisher, ed., The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), pp. 243-244.

but is achieved through his creative expression. He possesses nature at a distance; it is something present to, and within him, but also removed from him. Consequently, the artist must dissect nature in order to grasp its unity. Insofar as he succeeds through this interrogation, in making available the unity of the perceptual world previously hidden, the artist makes contact with existence.[2]

For Merleau-Ponty, the artist is in the world and therefore he is not an overman who transcends his empirical experience through the creation of some new manner or mode. It is much more natural and more descriptive to locate the unity of the history of painting in the human body which paints. Consequently, in as much as there is transcendence involved, it is a human transcendence, designated by human works. Hence the artist takes his body with him. It is by lending the body to the work that the artist, in himself, changes the world into painting. In order to understand this process of conversion, one must delve back to the actual body which is, in essence, the intermixture of movement and vision. Merleau-Ponty writes as follows:

> I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous machine. My mobile body makes the difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely, it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. Therefore, we see only what we look at.[3]

The enigma is that the body concurrently sees and is seen. In

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[2]Albert Rabil, Jr., Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist of the Social World, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), p. 208.

[3]Harold Osborne, ed., "Eye and Mind," in Aesthetics (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 58.

short, the body looks at all things and can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the other view--that of the power of inspection. The lived body is thus marked by a high degree of perceptiveness and originality. The body, as it is lived from the inside, is quite different from the objective body which is observed, though each perspective is legitimate in both a singular and a collective sense. The two overlap in such a manner so as to maintain a perpetual dualism which is that of the seeing--seen and touching--touched relationship. It is visible and sensitive for itself and is not a self through transparence, like thought, which only acknowledges its objects by assimilation, constitution, or transformation into thought. It is a self through confusion, narcissism, and inherence.[4]

Consequently the hereditary traits, influences, and accidents in an artist's life are of extreme importance and are inseparable. They give the literal significance, or occasion, to the work of art. This occasion is not idealistically accidental, as one would logically think, but is irrationally regarded as accidental, and yet remains necessary. The result is an unusual paradox. The occasion's importance lies essentially in the decision making of the true aesthetic value of a production. Productions without any occasion always lack something, due to the fact that the occasion belongs to the production. Yet in another sense it is also foreign to it, just as a production in which the occasion is everything also lacks something.[5] An artist's

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[4]Ibid.

[5]Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 234.

works, like a person's decisions, impose a metaphorical sense that is without precedence. Although one can be certain that a man's life does not solely explain his work, it is equally certain that the two entities are connected. In his essay, "Cezanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty describes this relationship as follows:

> . . . if I am a certain project from birth, the given and the created are indistinguishable in me, and it is therefore impossible to name a single gesture which is merely hereditary or innate, a single gesture which is not spontaneous--but also impossible to name a single gesture which is absolutely new in regard to that way of being in the world which, from the very beginning, is myself.[6]

Therefore, there is no difference between saying that our life is completely constructed and that it is completely given. The very decisions which transform us are always made in reference to a factual situation. Such a situation can, of course, be accepted or rejected, but it cannot fail to give us our impetus for the value we give to it. If there is a true liberty, it can come about only in the course of one's life by going beyond the original situation and yet not ceasing to be the same. The two things certain about this freedom are that we never lack determination and yet we never change. Looking back on what we were, we can always find hints of what we have become. It is therefore up to the individual to understand both of these things simultaneously, as well as the way this freedom dawns in us without denying the existence of the world.

It further follows that vision, for Merleau-Ponty, is not a certain mode of thought or simply a presence. This vision is described as follows:

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[6]Alden L. Fisher, ed., The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 308.

> . . . it is the means for being absent from oneself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside; the fission at whose termination, and not before, one comes back to oneself.[7]

Hence the painter's world is a visible world, nothing but visible. In a sense, it is a world almost demented because it is complete and yet, at the same time, partial. The painter is obliged to admit that either objects which he sees are absorbed into him or that the mind goes out through the eyes to wander among objects. Accordingly, he must come to the realization that he can never cease adjusting his clairvoyance. As the painter Paul Klee relates:

> In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me . . . I was there, listening . . . I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it . . . I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried.[8]

The vision of which Merleau-Ponty speaks has the ability to awaken powers dormant in ordinary optics in order to pursue the secret of pre-existence. It must be realized that art is not a construction, nor an edifice, nor an exacting relationship to a space, nor a world existing outside of this vision. Merleau-Ponty explains this relationship as follows:

> . . . when through the water's thickness I see the tiling at the bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without this flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is--which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself--the aqueous power, the sirupy and shimmering element--is in space; all this is not

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[7]Harold Osborne, ed., "Eye and Mind," in Aesthetics (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 81.

[8]Ibid., p. 63.

> somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, it materializes itself there, yet it is not contained there; and if I raise my eyes toward the screen of cypress where the web of reflections is playing, I cannot gainsay the fact that the water visits it, too, or at least sends into it, upon it, its active and living essence.[9]

Likewise, it is clear that this vision cannot be separated from the body just as one's situation cannot be separated from his perceptions. It is a vision that opens upon a texture of existing in which the mechanics of the eyes are only of minimal importance. "The eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house."[10]

In the painter at work, Maurice Merleau-Ponty found a graphic emblem of man's relative independence from his present existence in his particular modes of expression. The first line, color, or shape used on a canvas is, in a sense, stylistically predetermined. It must respond to the exact need that impelled the artist to paint while producing a coherent imbalance which will be equivalent of the demands of the moment that challenged its very existence. It is essential that this element of design echoes a new diversion to be expressed. The artist's proficiency must be in a state of continual rebirth so that everything that was once expressed is disclosed yet again in a different way. Such a component is responsible in the determination of the entire field around which the finished work of art will base itself. It must also be emphasized that there is no one master key to the visible. From his Critique of Reason, Merleau-Ponty writes the following:

> . . . the truly poetic moment that incarnates a new point of view on things acts as a configuration--forming corporeal

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[9] Ibid., p. 77.

[10] Ibid., p. 62.

> attitude which helps us hold off the other and asserts our stand in relation to it; like the other expression of man's finite freedom, it incarnates itself by using as its organ what is already disposed in the corps propre, which it creatively renovates, thus challenging further expression; the new word therefore takes place in the world, rather than appearing as an arbitrary epiphemenon; thus, once pronounced, it necessarily remains forever inserted in time and is capable of sedimenting in its unique and remarkable way.[11]

Moreover, it must be understood that every expression is a limited but creative act and that it is the realization of a finite liberty. All artistic acts are created by reference. Their reality consists in the extension of an already given sense or in the crystallization of more sophisticated figures within the persisting world. In the case of music, no figure is stated that is definable enough to set itself up as an end of action, thus enjoying the illusion of comprehending what exists. Painting, by contrast, can make present the world in definite form, even going as far as attempting to reproduce things as they are. Merleau-Ponty separates painting into two categories: those works that pertain to inauthenticity and those that deal with authenticity. Inauthentic painting is that which believes it has found the ultimate formula for capturing any aspect of the world's spectacle and renders it fully on canvas or paper. Authentic painting recognizes and meets the ontological problems of configuration, even when unconscious of its philosophical implications. Criticism demands that the painter should not be a mere camera eye and that great works of art should be true not to the retina but to life. Therefore, the painter has to grasp the things he meets in a multidimensional and perceptual experience and then distribute this experience onto a two

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[11] Thomas Langan, Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Reason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 134.

dimensional canvas.[12]

Despite the artist's convictions about the reality of the things he sees and about their relation to what he has painted, the artist is aware that he must resort to artificial methods of representation. He must adopt a system of equivalences as a means of self expression, realizing that the criterion of any system's success is whether or not the end configuration is true to the experience of the world. However, he must also realize that the particular system that he has chosen is clearly not what determines success. Analytical perspective or panels of carefully executed gradations are not, in themselves, panaceas any more than they can be considered as errors. Ultimately, what each technique suggests can never be fully exhuasted, for it implies a blending of the relationship of body-mind and being into an arrangement within the world of the painter.[13] Therefore, they are simply ways of questioning things and their existence, ways of implicating internal movement by which things become visible.

The painter must not be tempted to think that he can positively bring together the whole truth of painting into his canvas or that he can be the solitary voice of his time. Indeed the opacity of his medium encourages him to accept completely his existence as a unique moment, one valid result of differing points of view. Although superficially the opacity severs him from the flow of history, it also anchors the artist more securely in the particular instant. The artist is essentially cut off from any concept-based dialogue. Merleau-Ponty elaborates as follows:

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[12]Ibid., p. 150.

[13]Ibid., p. 151.

> . . . the painter is invested in the brute, precultural, fundamental dialogue of our perceptual presence in the world, that most primordial of intentional transgressions. The centering of the artist's attention on his own gesture--both his perceptual gesture and its extension and reprise in the pictorial--reveals it as momentary, limited, contingent; it is almost impersonal, for it originates in a call of and is reinvested in matter, but he can nevertheless assert it as meaningful, as sense-giving.[14]

The advantage and the attractiveness of modern painting lies in its capacity to draw attention to its system of equivalences as gestures and to materialize the insufficiency and certainty of these gestures. Such painting suggests the mysterious, but necessary, relation of these gestures to a truth that is undefinable. It is a truth that only can be implied by asserting gestures as deformations. Thus the very strangeness, the individuality, the opacity, and the essence of inaccessibility of modern painting emphasizes the need for each human being to continually structure and restructure the working material supplied by any given moment. The viewer, as well as the painter, must accept the individualism and its limitations as well as the element of contingency linked to the very nature of being. It is necessary for man to reveal his notion of existence through a series of partial truths that in some way assert themselves as moments of substance. According to Merleau-Ponty, the real end of a painting is to discuss, to uncover the visual world in the making. He continues as follows:

> A painter must help others experience the reality of the life of things, of that which is not his or the viewer's ego; he must force the contemplator to go out of himself in order to assist at the fission of being, only at the end of which (process), I close on myself. The result of any painting, the authentic end of any configuration,

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[14]Ibid., p. 155.

> is not to permit one to have the painting, but to open one to a possession that is bipolar.[15]

It is not enough for a painter, or a philosopher, to create and express an idea; they must also awaken the experiences which will make their idea take root in the consciousness of others. A successful work has the strange power to teach its own lesson. Consequently, a painter can do no more than construct an image. He must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work will have united these separate lives and it will no longer exist in only one of them like a persistent delirium, nor will it exist as a piece of colored canvas. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> Painting aims at re-creating the original source of all sense. It is that moment when the world was first grasped as other. It aims at provoking a movement of pulling back into the notion of nonexistence in order to allow the brute power of being to reveal itself, thus permitting each structure to suggest its invisible sides, its own partial-total world.[16]

Hence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty views a new humanism that is born in contemporary painting. This humanism is a synthesis of various inter-related assertions: the first being that man is viewed as a living relationship with matter. This relationship takes many different forms and therefore can never lead the way to any notion of a humanity wholly made. Consequently, humanity is recognized as free and inventive, without stability, and menaced by the world. A realization must also be made that the idea of being-in-the-world is no longer intelligible in terms of laws, but, instead, has the character of mystery and astonish-

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[15] Ibid., p. 151.

[16] Garth Gillan, ed., The Horizons of the Flesh: Critical Perspectives on the Thought of Merleau-Ponty (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973), p. 107.

ment. Just as the notion of being includes the essence of obscurity, so does the artistic creation. Merleau-Ponty asserts that this creation does not disclose either a finality or a pre-established harmony, but rather a movement in which form takes possession of matter without ceasing.[17] Expressing what exists is an endless task.

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[17]Robert C. Solomon, From Rationalism to Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1972), p. 294.

CONCLUSION

We, as individuals, live in the midst of man-made objects, among machinery, in fabrications, in mazes of city streets, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become accustomed to thinking and believing that all of this exists necessarily and unshakeably. The presence of the philosopher, or the artist, in the world, is from that perspective an ironical presence; for the aesthetician does not change the world but sows the seeds of doubt among men. He makes them uneasy about themselves and about their assurance which leads them to believe they have a firm hold on their existence. Nevertheless, it is the very ambiguity of this relationship of philosophy with the world and the awareness of the impossibility of absolute revelation that opens up, within discourse, a groundwork towards truth. Yet the essence of philosophical, or artistic, endeavor does not consist of that consciousness by itself. It is interested in historical man as he is engaged and existing in the world and is not directed toward an abstract worldless consciousness. Hence, it must be realized that the meaning of what the philosopher, or artist, is trying to say does not exist anywhere--not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reasons in which cultured men are content to shut themselves, toward a realm of ongoing interaction.

Art is related above all to the perceived world with which we are in living contact. It seeks to describe that world through various media, to put us in touch with it, to awaken us to the nature of the world, and ourselves, in the presence of which we live. It also strives to activate our freedom in that world in order to lead us beyond what has been to what can be, through human intentions. Thus, art is supremely responsible to society, not as an arm of propaganda--but as a means of directing toward a primordial perception of the world, to a fresh engagement with an open universe.

The life of the artist is therefore of a difficult nature. He cannot help considering himself powerless because he is not omnipotent, because he is not deified and wants nevertheless to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make visible how the world touches humanity. Just as the task of a writer is not to persuade his readers to accept his own doctrine, but rather to encourage them to adopt a critical attitude toward human life, so too, must be the task of the artist. Merleau-Ponty writes in sum:

> . . . the painter's aim is to make the contemplator aware of the miracle of creativity which is hidden in his own perceptive act, in even the most modest pre-reflexive advance beyond the bare givens. The painter who fails to make us see that our perception opens us onto a fathomless sea of reality, ever capable of deepening and reformulating, is activistic in that, by setting a definite goal to his activity, he distorts its true nature, which is to make other activity in its turn possible. Activism accomplishes nothing. Without the reference beyond, without intention, the figure that would be in and for itself is therefore not true, is non-sense.[1]

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[1]Thomas Langan, Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Reason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 152.

The artist must also realize the contingency of his situation. He is in the world and yet, by the very nature of his interrogation, he leads a privileged existence that is apart from the world: not above or beyond the world but on a plane of its own. In dealing with the internal relationship of this existence, he must remain faithful in his search for truth. His experiences must envelop him and he must uphold the virtue of his convictions. Friedrich Nietzsche writes the following:

> . . . my enemies are those who want to destroy without creating their own selves. One must therefore destroy in order to try to create. One must extol integrity and castigate "hog-faced" pleasure seekers.[2]

The artist must not function in a realm which permits approximative thought to be the creator of reality; that domain wherein intelligence seems to be the faculty for not developing what one thinks to the very end. He must pursue the perceptual life-world and realize that it does not consist of objective variables and functional relationships. In doing so, he must reduce his world to the purest, simplest, and most attainable form. The writer Hemingway concludes, "I go through a book several hundred times, honing it until it gets an edge like the bullfighter's sword."[3] The artist must approach the work of art in the same manner.

The artist cannot cease from exploration. The hopeful end of any such exploration will be for him to arrive where he started, at his

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[2]Geoffrey Clive, ed., The Philosophy of Nietzsche (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1965), pp. 542-543.

[3]A. E. Hotchner, "Ernest Hemingway: An American Original," TV Guide, August 15, 1981, p. 27.

origin, and to know the place, and himself, for the very first time.

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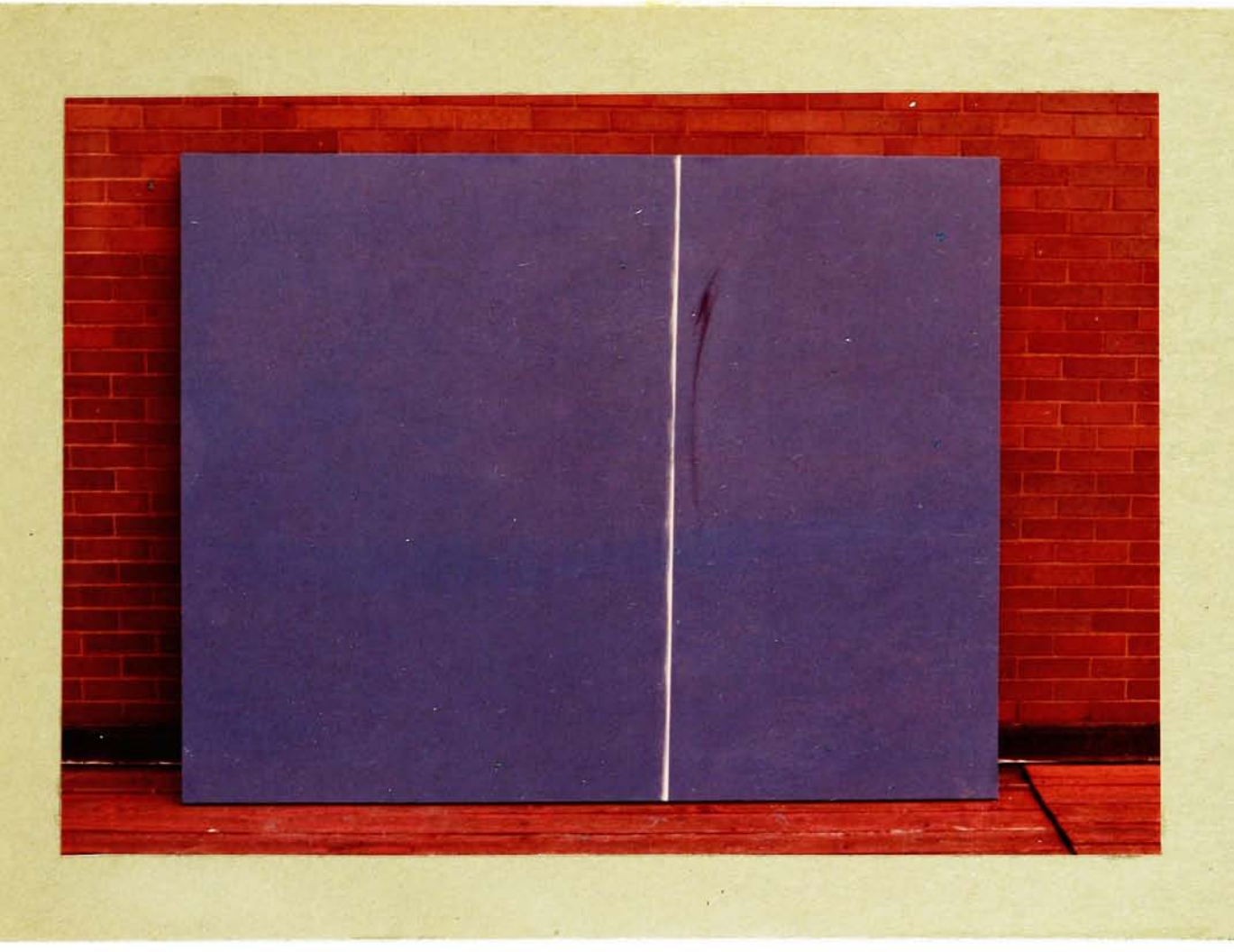

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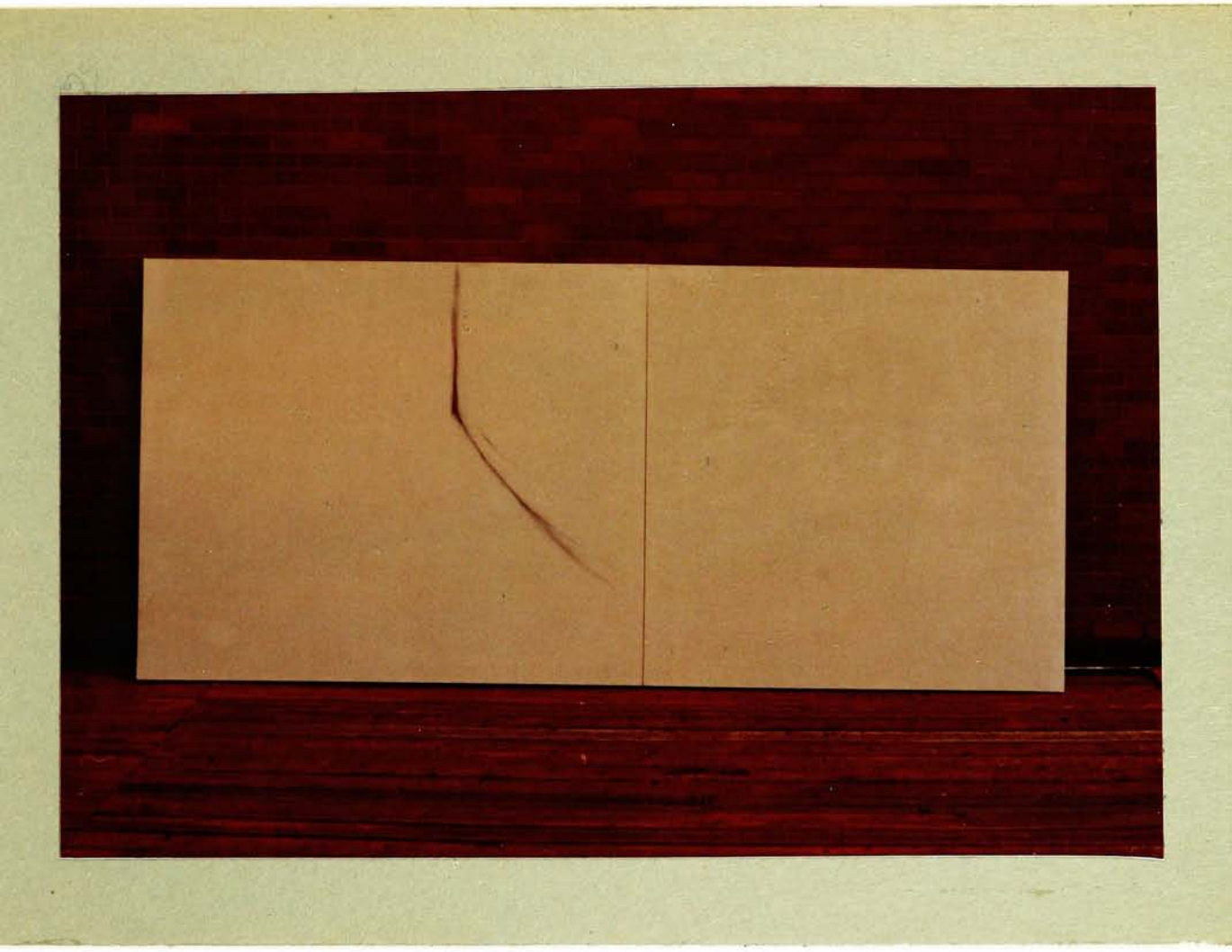

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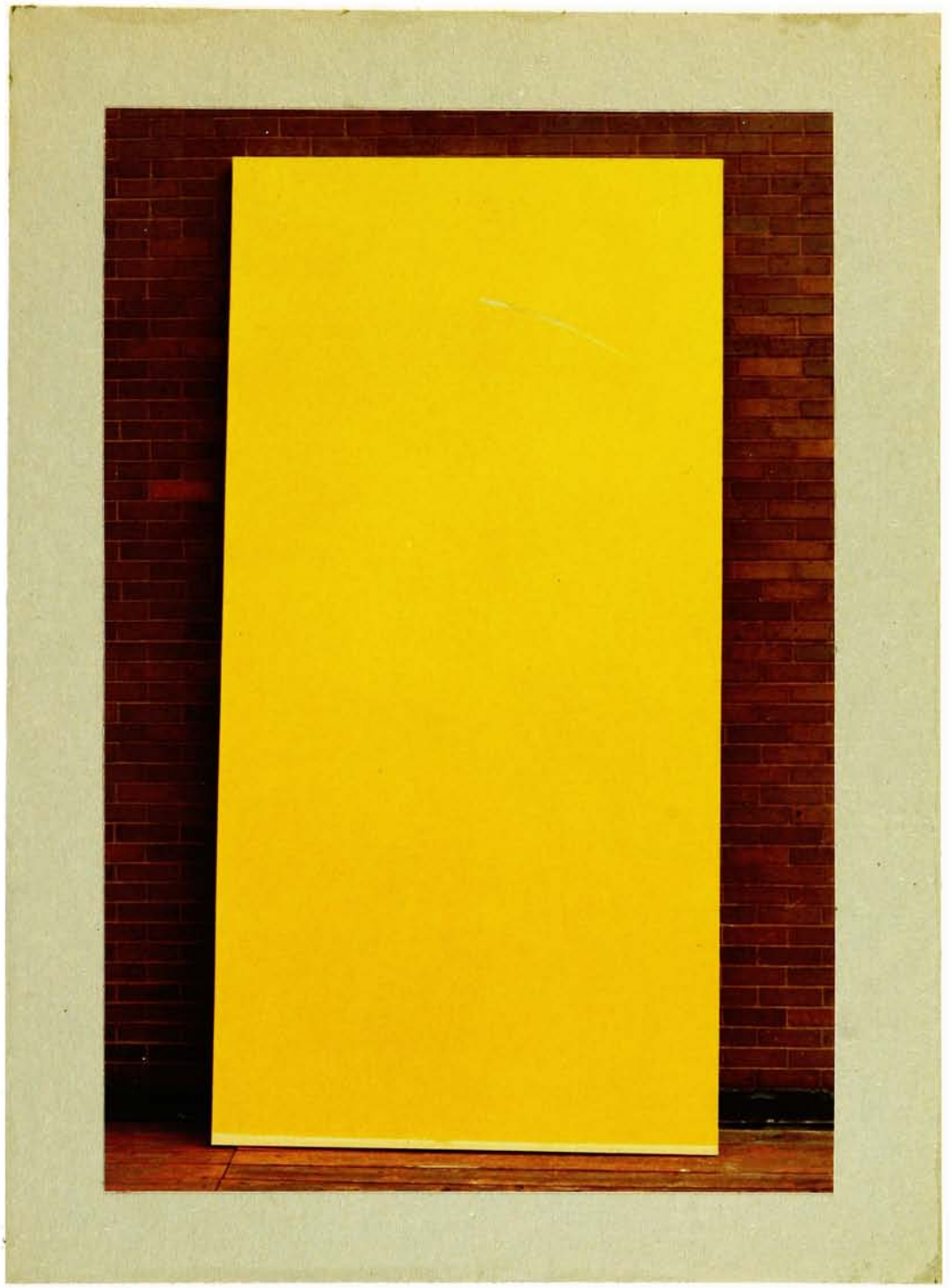

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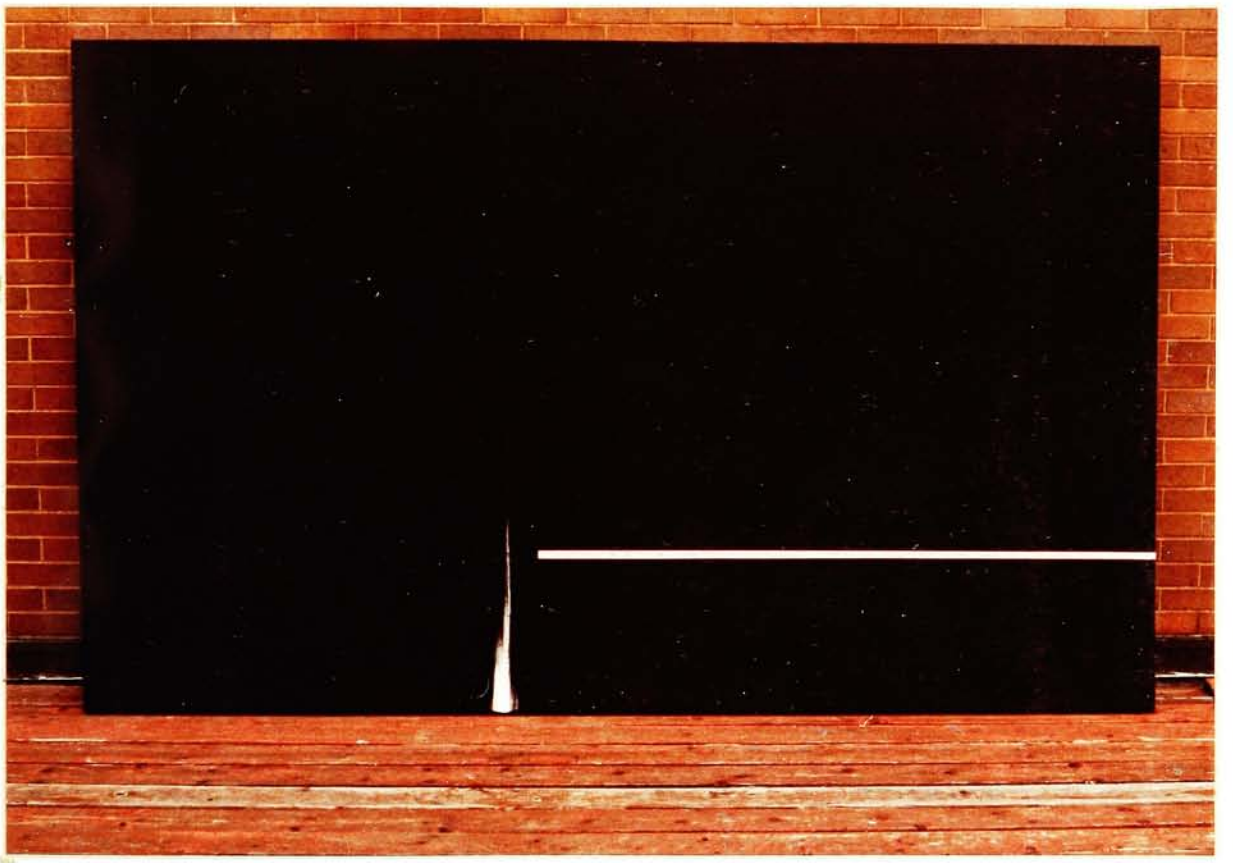

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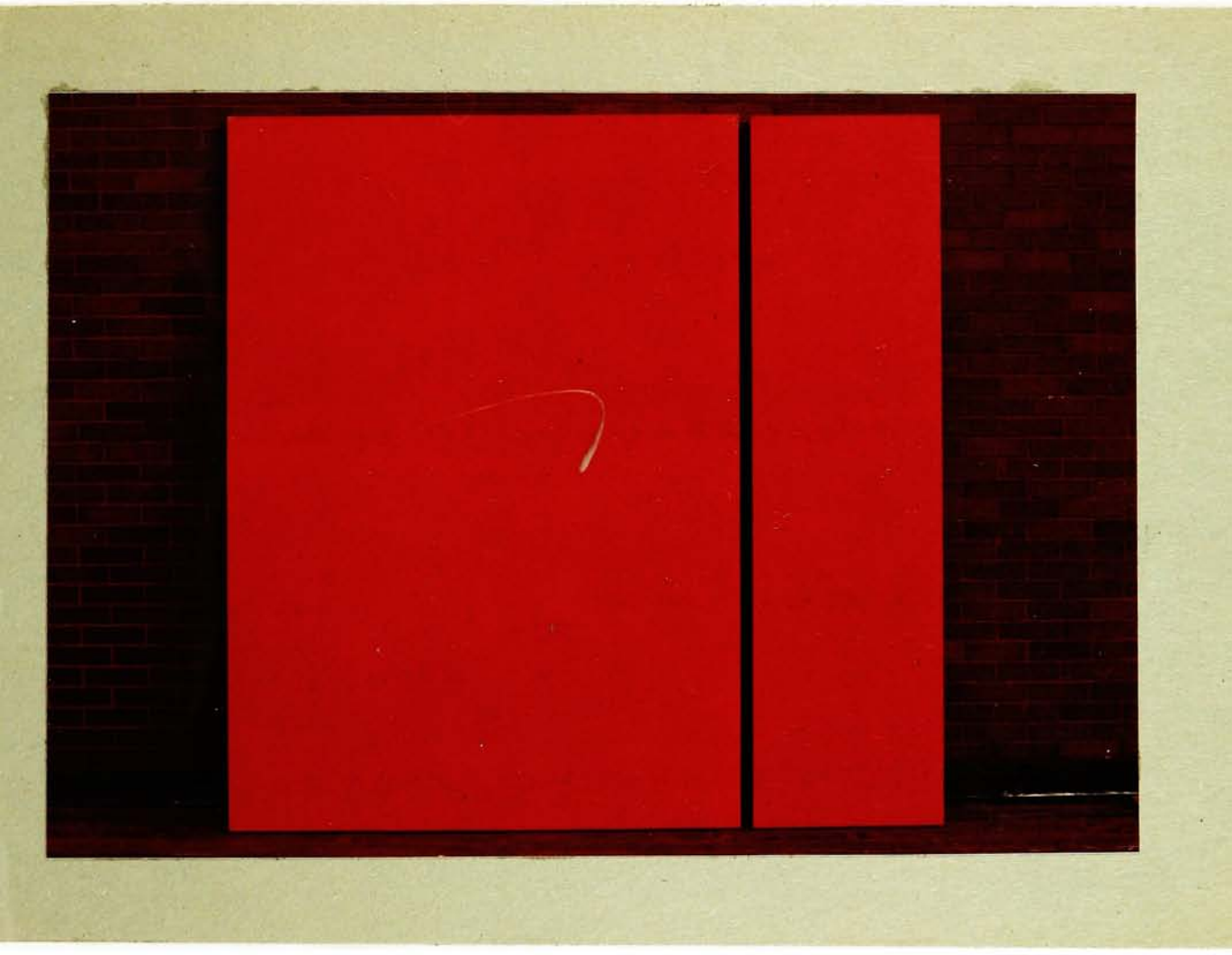

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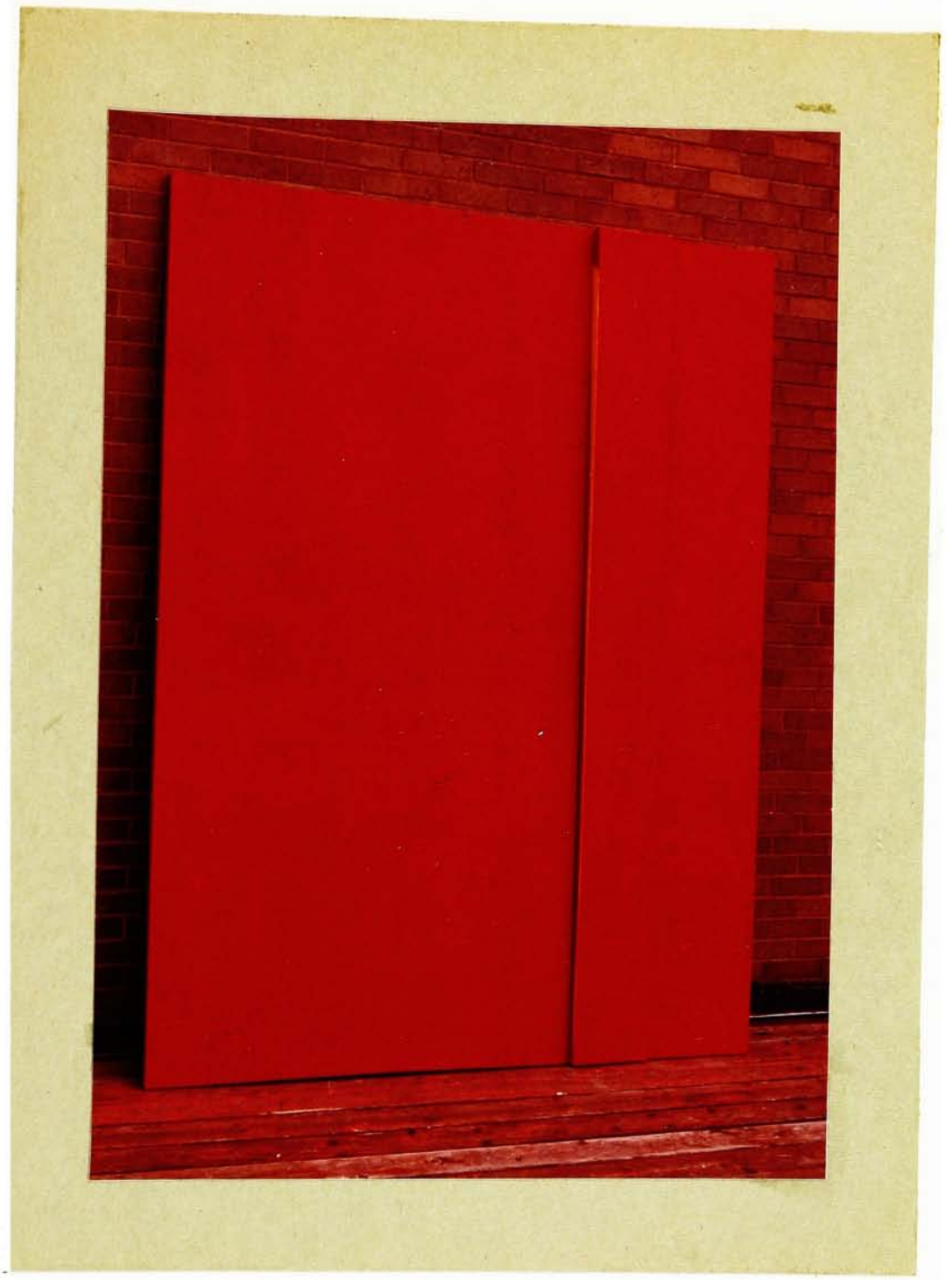

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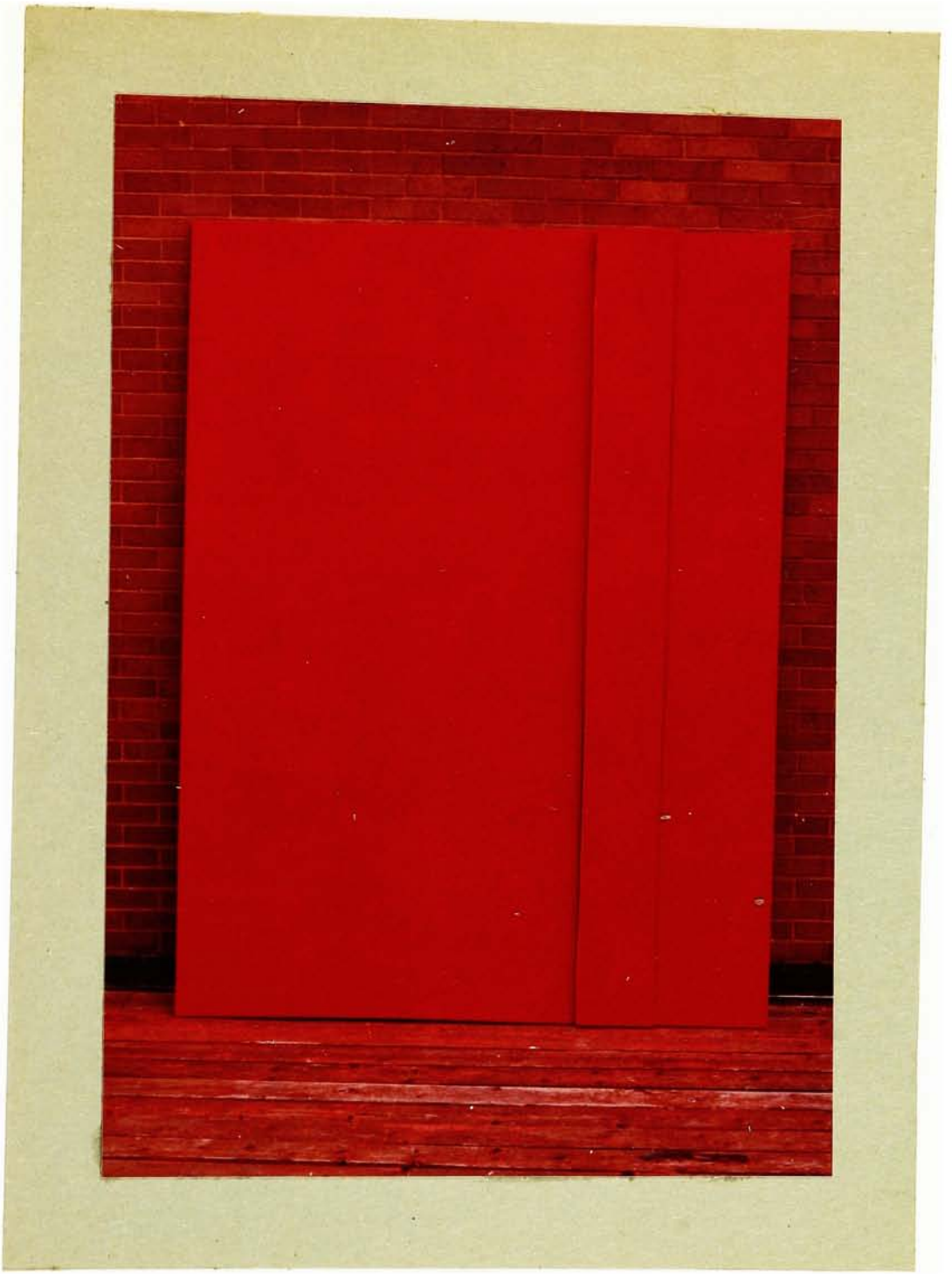

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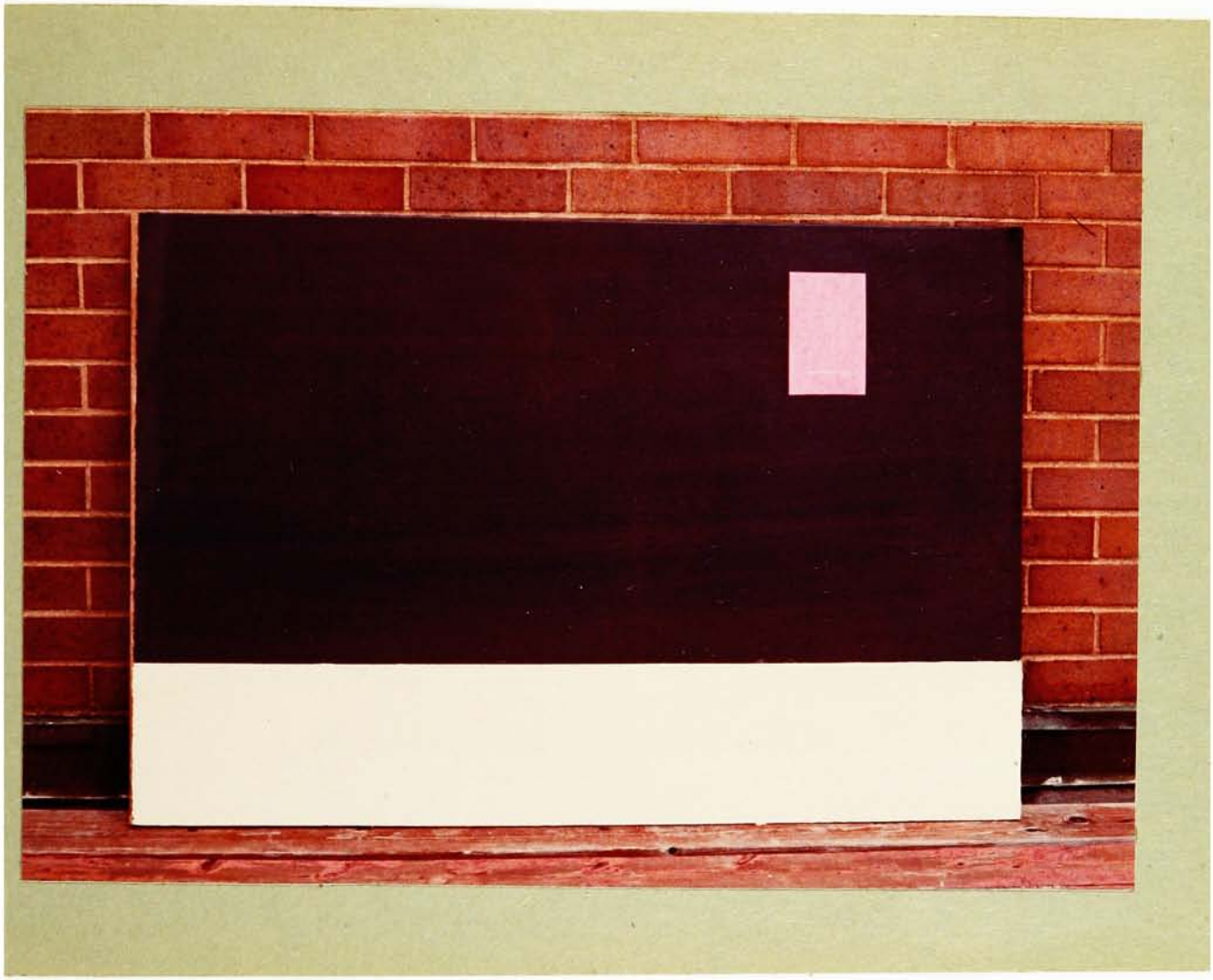

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